

1 **2022 RES-016**

2 **ESTABLISHING AN INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATION OF**
3 **THE HENRY VILAS ZOO**
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5 The Henry Vilas Zoo is one of Dane County’s most treasured assets and is one of the
6 very few free zoos left in the United States. It is accredited by the Association of Zoos
7 and Aquariums, which is the gold standard of accreditation for zoos, and which is
8 achieved by less than 10 percent of wildlife exhibitors in the United States.

9 On April 17, 2022, the Wisconsin State Journal published an in-depth investigation of
10 the zoo, alleging racism, retaliation against zoo employees for union activities, animal
11 neglect, and other allegations.

12 On April 24, 2022, in an editorial titled “Zoo Needs Independent Investigation,” the
13 Wisconsin State Journal editorial board called for an independent investigation of the
14 zoo.

15 Under DCO 7.11(7), the county board and its standing committees “shall continually
16 monitor the performance of departments and agencies in carrying out the policies of
17 Dane County.”

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19 Wis. Stat. 59.51 grants the county board broad authority to “represent the county” and
20 “have the management of the business and concerns of the county in all cases where
21 no other provision is made.”

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23 The county board finds it is necessary to conduct an independent investigation of the
24 Henry Vilas Zoo in order to restore public confidence in the zoo, ensure that all zoo
25 employees are treated fairly, and to ensure that animals are being humanely cared for.
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27 NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Dane County Board Chair shall select
28 and appoint a retired Circuit Court Judge as a special investigator to lead an
29 independent investigation of the zoo.
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31 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the scope of the independent investigation shall
32 include all issues raised in the Wisconsin State Journal’s report, including but not limited
33 to:
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- 35 • allegations of racism by zoo management
- 36 • allegations of retaliation for union activity
- 37 • allegations of retaliation for whistleblowing
- 38 • allegations that employees have been unequally disciplined
- 39 • allegations that animals at the zoo have been neglected or mistreated
- 40 • allegations that zoo employees have left their jobs due to a hostile work
41 environment
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43 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the special investigator shall issue a written report,
44 including specific recommendations for reforms at the zoo, and shall appear at a
45 meeting of the Dane County Public Works and Transportation Committee to discuss the
46 investigative report and take questions from the committee.

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48 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that \$50,000 shall be appropriated from the county
49 board's program evaluation budget line for the independent investigation.

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51 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the retired judge who is appointed to be the special
52 investigator shall bill their time at the rate of \$200/hour, and the special investigator
53 shall further be authorized to bill for clerical and other staff assistance and necessary
54 expenses, not to exceed the \$50,000 total budget for this investigation.

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56 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the special investigator shall have use of the county
57 board's office suite, if needed, during the investigation to conduct meetings and
58 interviews.

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60 BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that the independent investigation and written report shall
61 be completed by no later than October 1, 2022, and shall be presented to a meeting of
62 the Public Works and Transportation Committee as soon as possible thereafter.